focus

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Cuba

The island republic of Cuba has a number of advantages over its Caribbean neighbors—greater size and natural wealth, a stronger economy, and more room for both population growth and economic development. In a region characterized by mountainous green islands with little to sell but scenery and excess labor, Cuba's position is enviable; it is the largest island in the Antilles and has most of the level land to be found in the entire island chain, permitting an economy solidly based on agriculture.

HISTORIC HIGHLIGHTS. Columbus found Cuba two weeks after his arrival in the New World, so the island has had a long recorded history. But once the placer gold had been skimmed, the fantastic wealth of Mexico, Peru, and lands as yet undiscovered lured men away from Cuba almost as fast as they arrived, and the island was destined to serve as little more than a well-placed way-station in the Spanish colonial empire for more than 200 years.

By piracy and smuggling, other European nations had nibbled at Spain's lucrative trade with its colonies, but Cuba was not opened to free trade until the British took Havana in 1762. Although that occupation lasted only a year, it profoundly influenced the island's history, for the greater access to world markets brought prosperity to Cuban landowners and merchants, and the old trade restrictions were never re-imposed.

The wave of revolt which spread across Spanish America after 1810 found Cuba lulled by "good times" and not particularly interested in civil strife. However, revolution was in the air, and in the face of Mexican and Colombian preparations to "liberate" the island, Spain thought it advisable to impose strict military control. Thus began a series of repressions and uprisings which plagued Cuba, on and off, throughout the nineteenth century. In 1878, a bitter Ten Years War ended in a peace of mutual exhaustion; but then fighting broke out again in 1895, and three years later the United States battleship *Maine* was blown up in the harbor of Havana. American military intervention quickly led to the Treaty of Paris, whereby Spain relinquished the island to the United States in trust for its inhabitants.

When a freely-elected Cuban government took office in 1902, the country was no longer in ruins, but it had practically nothing to sell except land. Thousands of foreign investors, chiefly Americans, stepped in and bought up enormous areas, and began to rebuild the sugar industry. By the 1920's, American investment in Cuba amounted to almost

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a billion dollars. Since the depression it has remained high, but it has never exceeded $800 million, nor has it regained its former dominance in terms of total foreign investment.

NATURAL SETTING. The island of Cuba rises from the submarine plateau which links it to neighboring Florida and the Bahamas. Like Florida, it is a low, level peneplain of limestone with extensive swampy areas in the south, notably the Peninsula of Zapata. But the easternmost province of Oriente is more akin to the rest of the Greater Antilles in structure, with its high, rugged, block-faulted mountains, offshore submarine trench, and consequent susceptibility to earthquakes.

Cuba has three main upland areas — the aforementioned Oriente region, which includes the Sierra Maestra and other ranges; the Trinidad Mountains near the center of the island; and, in the west, the Sierra de los Organos with its lumpy *mogotes* or haystack hills. Old igneous and metamorphic rock is exposed in these mountains and in various places along the island's backbone; these rocks contain most of the nation's mineral wealth. The usual bedrock, however, is limestone, which has weathered into the deep red clays so well suited to sugar production; but there are other, less useful features associated with limestone in a humid climate—caverns, subterranean rivers, and probably most injurious to land values, hundreds of square miles pocked by swampy or water-filled sinkholes.

The 2,000-mile coastline is generally shallow and obstructed by coral reefs and mangrove, but as if to compensate for this, Cuba has dozens of fine natural harbors such as the famous "pocket bays" of Havana, Nuevitas, and Santiago de Cuba. There are thousands of offshore islands, the largest of which is the Isle of Pines, and many short rivers, though only one, the Cauto of Oriente, is of any size or navigability.

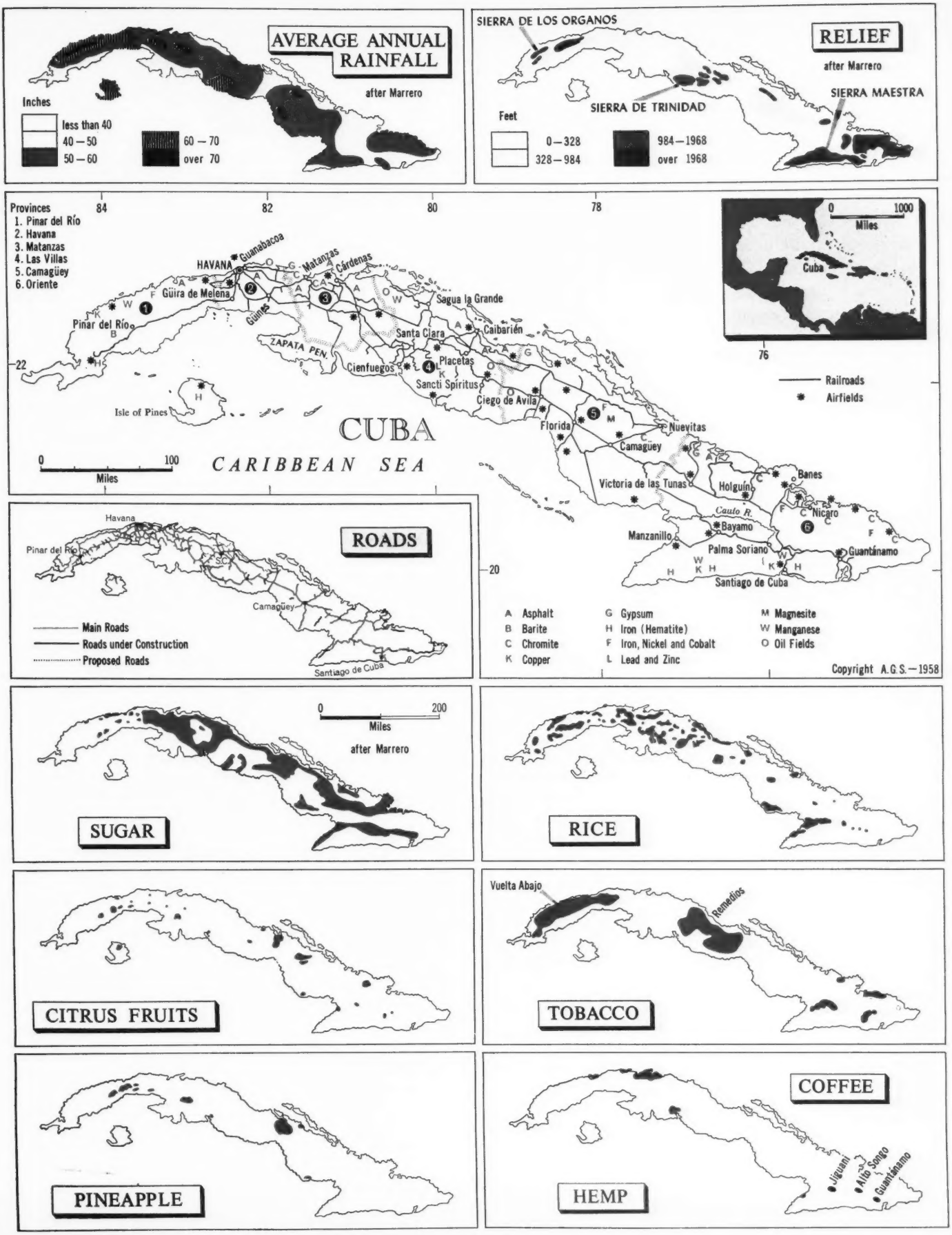
The climate is uniformly warm, average temperatures at all seasons being in the seventies; officially-recorded extremes are about 50° F., and 100°F. June and October are the months of heaviest rainfall, and there is a winter dry season. Cuba can expect to be visited by about one-tenth of all Caribbean hurricanes; the western provinces of Pinar del Rio and Havana catch most of these as they swing toward North America.

FORESTS, FISHERIES, AND MINERALS. Exploitation of Cuba's resources has been uneven. The forests have been badly mauled, even in seemingly remote areas, and much marginal land, cleared in times of high sugar prices, must soon be abandoned, to be taken up by poor squatters or left to grow up again, worthless for decades thereafter. The dense tropical rainforests, still to be found in some relatively moist and inaccessible mountain areas, supply valuable cabinet woods, cedar for cigar boxes, and local building material. The thin pine woods, much like those of the southern United States, and characteristic of the infertile, sandy soils of Pinar del Rio and the Isle of Pines, supply hundreds of thousands of posts and poles needed every year by tobacco growers. A nearly continuous belt of mangrove fringes the island; its moth-eaten aspect attests to the diligence of Cuba's *carboneros*, or charcoal-burners—charcoal is the only available cheap household fuel.

The fishing industry is at present too small-scale and poorly organized to supply the nation's needs, and a great deal of fish is imported from nations around the North Atlantic fishing grounds. In Cuban waters, the chief food fish are snappers, groupers, and ocean perch. Shrimp, lobsters, sharks, and sponges provide exportable marine products, and game fish, such as marlin, tuna, and swordfish, are an important tourist attraction.

Mineral exploitation has been almost entirely in foreign hands and geared to the world supply-and-demand situation of the moment, so the mines are opened and closed without regard to local needs. There are good deposits of copper, nickel, manganese, chrome, and iron. In general the iron is being held in reserve by the American steel companies which own it, though certain iron ores are being mined for their valuable ferroalloy content. With the exception of whatever refined nickel is produced at Nicaro when that plant is in operation, all Cuban metals are shipped out in the form of ores or concentrates, and all go to the United States.

The mineral fuels situation is not promising. There are a few wells producing oil or natural gas and several deposits of asphalt; but the evidence suggests that geological disturbances have damaged or destroyed most of the local oil resources. Apart from the sugar mills that burn their own cane waste, or bagasse, for power, the nation's industry is de-



Maps drawn by Vincent Kotschar

pendent almost entirely on imported fuels—oil from the United States or Venezuela, coal from the United States.

POPULATION. At present, the population of Cuba is estimated to be 6,300,000, and it is increasing by about 2.3 per cent a year. The number of inhabitants has more than quadrupled since 1899, but the overall population density of 143 per square mile is not yet oppressive.

According to the 1953 census, the nation's racial composition is 73 per cent white, 14 per cent mulatto, and 13 per cent Negro. The ratio of white to colored has been altering in favor of the whites ever since the importation of slaves ended in 1845. The white population is, of course, descended primarily from Spanish settlers, although many French came to Cuba after the sale of Louisiana to the United States and the loss of Haiti to rebellious slaves. There are also some 16,000 Orientals, descendants of indentured workers brought in in the nineteenth century. A modest flow of European immigrants, mainly Spanish, continues to the present time, and thousands of Negro laborers from Haiti enter for temporary employment each year.

Within the island, the most populous province is Oriente, followed by Havana; Oriente and Camagüey have had the highest rate of increase—34 and 28 per cent, respectively, in the period 1943-53. The cities have grown rapidly, too. Metropolitan Havana is by far the largest city in the Caribbean, with about 1,220,000 inhabitants, or 20 per cent of the island's people. Other large cities are Santiago de Cuba (163,000), Camagüey (110,000), and Santa Clara (77,000). Outside of the Havana area, the fastest-growing cities are in the eastern provinces: Holguín, for example, has increased from 7,500 in 1907 to 57,000 in 1953, and its growing-pains are evident from its crowded center to its sprawling shacktown fringes.

AGRICULTURE. Sugar is Cuba's number-one crop. It occupies half of the cultivated land, employs a quarter of the labor force, and provides 85 per cent of exports by value (including such by-products as rum, molasses, alcohol, and syrups). Although the *sabanas arcillosas* provide the best land for it, sugar is grown wherever it can be induced to take root. The immense quilted fields of tall green cane and the buildings and stacks of isolated sugar *centrales* dominate the landscape of nearly all of Cuba, even as the demands of sugar cultivation dominate the rural round of life for field-hands and semi-independent *colonos* alike. The year is divided into the *zafra*, or harvest season, lasting roughly from January into April, a period of furious activity and relative prosperity, and the *tiempo muerto*, or dead season, a period of more or less enforced leisure and financial troubles.

Large landholdings, or *latifundios*, are an old and widespread feature of former Spanish colonies. In Cuba, the land grants were at first of modest size: the *caballería*, a unit of land measure still in use, consists of about 33 acres and was originally intended to support a gentleman. Later, when extensive cattle raising began, much larger grants were made. The circular *corrals* and *hatos*, of 22 and 88 square miles, respectively, have left their mark on the Cuban landscape in arcuate roads and fence lines, even though they are no longer held intact. Now the sugar centrals are the large landholders — the average central owns or controls 40,000 acres; the largest, 165,000 acres. With such tremendous areas in sugar or "in reserve," Cuba must import much of its food. So long as everyone is able to make a

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living, the arrangement is one of proven profitability, but in a depression, the existence of large numbers of landless rural workers and the inadequacy of domestic food crops can create an explosive situation.

Tobacco is the second most important crop, occupying three per cent of the cultivated land and providing six per cent of the export income. The Vuelta Abajo district of Pinar del Río is the most famous of all Cuban tobacco regions; the Remedios district of Las Villas is next in volume and repute. The tobacco industry employs about 125,000 workers, some 15,000 of them in the fields, chiefly as sharecroppers, and the rest in processing plants, most of which are in Havana.

Two other commercial crops — pineapples and winter vegetables — are exported in quantity to the United States; citrus fruits, bananas, coffee, cacao, and hemp are grown mostly for domestic consumption. By using modern American methods and machinery, slightly cheaper local labor, and lands newly won from coastal mangrove swamps, rice production has gone up fourfold since 1945, last year's crop being estimated at about 160,000 tons. In fact, rice is now providing handsome profits and is the newest big-money crop; and the potential market is large, for rice is basic in the Cuban diet.

Then there are the subsistence crops common to all of tropical America — corn, beans, plantain, starchy root crops, and a variety of local fruits. Traditionally, a working bullock, a few chickens, and perhaps some pigs constitute the farm livestock.

Beef and dairy production are both increasing, in response to a rising demand among the tourists and well-to-do in the cities, despite the low nutritive value of native grasses and the dry season which has almost the same effect as a cold season in cutting down the carrying capacity of pastures. As for feed, two crops of corn a year are common, but even three crops do well to equal in volume and feed value one crop in the American Midwest. These problems are being approached scientifically, however, and improvement can be expected.

TRANSPORTATION. For a nation which did not have a continuous east-west road until 1931, Cuba has caught up with the Automobile Age quite well. Paved roads *with* bridges (the weak link in Latin American roadbuilding) connect major cities and

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radiate from Havana, and construction is going on in some surprisingly remote places. The older roads, however, are none too good in places, and the dirt tracks are all subject to the evils of dry-season dust and wet-season mud. There are about 200,000 cars, trucks, and buses in operation.

In terms of track mileage, Cuba is well served by railroads, but many of them are sugar-company lines normally idle except at harvest time. The public railroads have suffered the same fate as those of the United States — loss of a good share of their passenger and freight traffic to road and air transport. A good network of domestic airlines serves to link Havana with the populous and fast-growing eastern provinces, and both Havana and Camagüey handle quite a bit of international traffic en route between North and South America.

MANUFACTURING. The island produces few of the raw materials from which to make the things it needs. Most of the food-processing plants use local produce, with such exceptions as flour mills and breweries, which use imported mid-latitude grains. Sacks and cordage are made from local hemp, shoes from hemp or leather, and mills to manufacture paper and wallboard from bagasse are beginning to operate. The plants that manufacture cotton and rayon textiles and clothing, paint, cosmetics, fertilizers, plastics, and light metal goods must all depend upon imported raw or semi-finished materials. There is virtually no heavy industry.

In general, the lack of cheap fuel for power, plus a deluge of cheap manufactured goods from the United States have inhibited development of even light industries. Despite expansion programs of the American-owned utility company, power shortages and/or high rates remain obstacles to any development depending upon electricity. The sugar centrals normally supply their own power (more than half the total generated in Cuba), but only in the harvest season, and under present conditions the establishment of a national grid is not considered necessary or practical.

Although the sugar industry, still the basis of all prosperity in Cuba, is in relatively good condition these days, painful experiences with a boom-and-bust one-crop economy have not been lost on the government. The United States, the biggest buyer, and many European nations have tropical possessions or a domestic cane or beet-sugar industry to protect, or, as in the case of the United States, all of these. The United States has allotted Cuba a sizable portion of the American market as well as a preferential tariff treatment, but it is not prepared to assume the Cuban farm-surplus burden in addition to its own. Although the Soviet Union has recently begun to purchase Cuban sugar in considerable quantities, nevertheless Cuba, the world's foremost exporter, is frequently unable to sell all of its sugar at a profit.

It is generally recognized that diversification of agriculture, development of light consumer-goods industries, and pursuit of the tourist dollar offer alternative means of economic survival. The Cubans look forward to the day when tourists will leave behind them $100 million a year and there is good reason to believe that this may happen, barring serious political upheavals, for the island is convenient to Miami, and has the same attractions as any other Caribbean island — pleasant climate, picturesque landscape, luxury hotels, and places of cultural interest. The problem is mainly one of making the necessary alterations in economic and other fields to assure greater diversification while the income from sugar still provides something to work with.

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